

**PESACH 5766/2006**

Everything about Pesach seems to point toward beginning and “newness.” The Haggadah tells the story of our formation as a people, when our relationship with God is in its earliest stages. We read *Shir haShirim* (the Song of Songs), reflecting both the external spring and the internal blossoming of new love. We cleanse our homes of anything old enough to have fermented, *hametz*. And as we sit at the seder table, our attention turns to the children -- the newest and youngest among us.

At the same time, Pesach presents us with a seeming contradiction, a paradox. Much of the observance of the day stresses repetition. The entire *seder* is, in essence, a recapitulation of something that has happened before: we repeat our prior experience of having been enslaved and then freed. The core mitzvah of the evening -- the *Haggadah*, the telling of the story -- is an exercise in rehearsing that which we already know:

וְאִפְּלוּ כָּלֵנוּ חֲכָמִים כָּלֵנוּ גְבוּרִים כָּלֵנוּ זְקֵנִים כָּלֵנוּ יוֹדְעִים אֶת הַתּוֹרָה מִצְוָה עָלֵינוּ לְסַפֵּר בְּיָצִיאַת  
מִצְרָיִם. וְכָל הַמְרַבֵּה לְסַפֵּר בְּיָצִיאַת מִצְרָיִם הָרִי זֶה מְשֻׁבַּח:

Even if all of us were learned, all of us wise, all of us elders, all of us knowledgeable in the Torah, we are obligated to tell of the Exodus from Egypt, and all who tell of the Exodus from Egypt at length are praiseworthy (from the Haggadah).

And on Pesach, we ask questions not because we *don't* know the answers, but precisely when we *do* know:

תנו רבנן: חכם בנו - שואלו, ואם אינו חכם - אשתו שואלתו. ואם לאו - הוא שואל לעצמו. ואפילו  
שני תלמידי חכמים שיודעין בהלכות הפסח - שואלין זה לזה.

Our Rabbis taught: If his son is learned, he asks him, while if he is not learned his wife asks him. And if not, he asks himself. And even where there are two scholars who are learned in the laws of Passover -- each one asks the other. (Pesachim 116a)

Indeed, perhaps no one feels this repetitive aspect more keenly than we in the diaspora: we go through the entire *seder* and Haggadah on the first night of Pesach, and then, do it all over again tomorrow!

How do we reconcile this two seemingly contradictory aspects of Pesach? How do we understand a command to express newness through repetition? It seems that the sense of renewal and beginning that we are meant to experience on Pesach is a very particular *kind* of renewal and beginning, very different from what we usually consider to be “new.”

Society at large has become habituated to constant innovation. By the time we learn how to use the latest technology it is already outdated; fashions, celebrities, political theories, music, art, even linguistic expressions become passe at a dizzying pace. We have “been there done that,” and suffer from a pervasive sense of ennui.

This is true not only in secular life but also in our Judaism, and in our relationship with God. This is true in part because we graft onto our religious lives the modes of being to which we become accustomed in the secular world. But it is also endemic to Jewish life. We are a community of

learners, and it is thrilling to attain new insight, knowledge, and skill. That joy can easily become an addiction, and like any addiction, it becomes more and more difficult to satisfy; the more knowledgeable we become, the harder it is to encounter new approaches to the same texts and new “meaning” in our observance.

Nowhere is this trend more clearly evident than at Pesach. The pace at which new haggadot are written and published is truly staggering. We generate an endless supply of tools and texts to help make the seder newly interesting, lively, creative, compelling. We produce props and toys, employ costumes and dramatizations, search for new melodies, new readings, new interpretations. Many of us feel tremendous pressure each year to make Pesach intellectually and experientially new.

There is nothing wrong, of course, with such innovation; in the right measure, and at the right time, it is not only essential but quite wonderful. Even as the Pesach story remains the same, the means by which we convey it to children must keep pace with the evolving ways that children learn and experience the world; otherwise, our communication will become ineffective.

Nevertheless, in our largely laudable search for ever-new relevance and meaning on Pesach, we risk also missing the point. Although we undoubtedly need to encounter the unfamiliar in order to grow, the need for continually new stimulation can itself become a harsh taskmaster, an addiction requiring constant feeding.

Pesach, therefore, is not about “new input.” On the contrary, part of our task at Pesach is *davka* to resist our addiction to new stimulation, and to instead practice approaching all that is -- even the familiar and “old” -- anew. *Mah nishtanah ha-lailah ha-zeh?* How is this night different from all other nights? On all other nights, we seek newness from without; on this night, we renew our capacity to find newness from within. We remind ourselves that we do not need new sights, we need new eyes; we do not need a new story to tell, we need new ears with which to hear.

This capacity to see with new eyes is the only true, lasting remedy for boredom and spiritual stagnation. The joy of spiritual discovery -- however exciting and challenging at the first -- inevitably yields (and *should* yield) to familiar, routinized practice, at least to some extent. Authentic religious life is, by its nature, repetitive. Yes, the possibility of new interpretations, new meaning, and new expressions of Judaism remains ever-present and ever-necessary; absent that potential, we and our tradition would stagnate and wither. But our relationship with God and Judaism ought never become entirely *dependent* upon such innovation; if we require continually escalating intensity, sophistication and complexity to hold our interest, we will soon become disappointed and frustrated, and what we thought was our “divine spark within” will quickly fizzle out. Moreover, will have made an idol out of innovation, such that we are worshipping “newness,” not God.

And so, Pesach calls to us to deepen our capacity for internally-generated renewal. And nowhere more importantly -- and with higher stakes -- than in our relationship with God. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik teaches that on Pesach, we are meant to renew our faith by returning to a mode of “naivete and absolute trust, heroic childhood”:

Matzah symbolizes this trust, boundless and unqualified, which the Jews placed in God on that night in Egypt. Matza represents an act of surrender and unconditional commitment to God, blind obedience to Him and compliance with His word. This faith, which expressed itself in their decision to follow Moses,

defied all rational standards. The act of believing bordered on the paradoxical, since it was in outright opposition to all practical considerations. To believe means to know something without understanding, to be convinced about something which is not subject to proof and substantiation. It is the naive approach of the child, a commitment based not a rationally explicable reason, but on an inner, intuitive, emotional, inexpressible experience.

Certain truths, which are beheld prior to the piecemeal ripening and gradual growth of the knowledgeable person, lie at the very base of our being. These experiences, which the mature person quite often might try to survey critically in a contemptuous manner, form the background of our existential awareness. These verities and experiences are represented by the matzah, which did not ferment, which was not subjected to the "process of gradual rising and ascending."

In Hebrew semantics, matzah signifies the unfinished, incomplete, immature, raw, underdeveloped, and instantaneous. It suggests to us the symbol of the naive child and his basic experiences, which must carry over into adulthood. On reaching ripeness of years, one must, in addition to being an intelligent adult, heroically identify oneself with the *yeled sha'ashuim*, the child of delight (Jer. 31:19).<sup>1</sup>

It seems that to be a mature adult in relationship with God requires two entirely different, seemingly contradictory modes. On the one hand, "piecemeal ripening and gradual growth" are essential; any being that is not growing and changing is dying. We are commanded to continually study and learn, to expand the depth and breadth of our Torah. We are meant to become knowledgeable, intelligent adults. On the other hand, the thinking, rational adults we become must also find room for the "heroic child."

This integration of the "heroic child" within our sophisticated adulthood is no mere romantic notion. It is an essential component of any mature theology.

It is essential first as protection against the possibility that our ever-increasing knowledge will lead to cynicism. Even were we not to survey our faith and tradition "critically in a contemptuous manner," there is enough suffering, degradation and evil in the world to raise doubts in the mind of any rational and aware person. We need a healthy residue of childlike hope and faith, as yet unsubmitted to rational inquiry, to remain sensitive to the sublime and open to possibility.

But the capacity to return to an experiential, non-rational relationship with God is more than a mere prophylactic. It is, in and of itself, a mark of spiritual freedom.

As we exchange the slavery of ignorance for the freedom of knowledge, we are always vulnerable to becoming once again enslaved: this time, to our intellectual attainment. Learning can be a path either to humility or to arrogance; it has the potential to reveal great truths, but it can also conceal them. This is because rationality and intellectual sophistication, while useful tools, are not in and of themselves adequate in approaching the Divine. Not everything is knowable through the mind; the mystery and majesty of God can be encountered, but never fully analyzed. And we are always at risk of confusing our limited knowledge with the Absolute, i.e. God.

---

1. Rabbi Joseph P. Soloveitchik, *Festival of Freedom -- Essays on Pesach and the Haggadah* (KTAV Publishing, 2006), pp. 63-64.

Moreover, the more we learn and the more mature and sophisticated we become, the greater the risk that we will become enslaved to the process -- and illusion -- of our own mastery. The addiction to *hiddushim* (innovation) in our Torah study and worship often masks a far deeper spiritual ill: the subtle, nearly imperceptible exchange of the true joy of Torah for the pleasure the ego takes in mastery. The simple joy of encountering wisdom and truth can easily be subsumed by the pleasure of experiencing one's self as learned and wise. Indeed, an honest look at the way we respond to hearing what we already know is one of the best ways of identifying what is really going on. When we truly rejoice in Torah and seek simply to better know God, our delight at a word of Torah is the same whether we are hearing it for the first time, or believe we have encountered it many times before. On the other hand, when we are dependent on continual new insights in order to feel that joy, chances are what we are enjoying is the ego boost, not the Torah.

Thus, the return on Pesach to a child-like, naive faith in God is not anti-intellectual, but rather supra-intellectual; we do not surrender our intellects and knowledge, we surpass them. On Pesach we learn that even our learning -- our ever-growing intellectual attainment, our theological struggle and sophistication, and most especially our *hiddushim* -- can become a form of *hametz*. Having spent the year acquiring learning and knowledge, we now reach beyond and back to something akin to what Buddhism calls "beginner's mind:" simple wonder, awe and faith, an appreciation of the mystery at the heart of all being, and an openness to encountering everything as if for the first time. That in itself is an assertion of our freedom. Our capacity to consciously stop being the "intelligent adult" and to recapture the "heroic child" is our participation in the redemption.

Nor is this "heroic childhood" to be confused with immature or childish faith. To reawaken a child-like naivete as an adult is not the same as being, in fact, a child. A mature and free relationship with God is based on the capacity to choose among different modes of experiencing the Divine. Now, when recalling and re-enacting the beginning of our relationship with the Divine, we consciously exchange our sophistication for a second naivete, suspending what we think we know for a child-like sense of wonder. In this mode, we allow the primal experience of oneness with God, of irrational trust and faith, to come to the fore.

Of course, we do not remain in this mode forever. As we cycle through the Jewish year, the "heroic child" will again become the knowledgeable adult; our simple, irrational faith will again be submerged in (albeit never completely supplanted by) the challenges presented by revelation (on Shavuot), and then again by the work of redemption (on Sukkot). Eventually, on Purim (the conclusion of the liturgical year) we will even mock our childlike dreams and simple faith.

But as the cycle begins again with Pesach, we temporarily suspend the accumulated intellectual weight of the year, and leave behind our habitual sophistication with its attendant ennui. We re-enter a simple, naive faith. We once again relish child-like delight at God's redemptive and creative power, and at the mere fact of being. Through the years, we become ever more adept at moving in and out of these different modes of encountering the Divine. So that whenever we find our faith, study, prayer, or observance so laden with *hametz* as to taste bitter, we have the spiritual maturity, freedom, and skill to return to simplicity.

May our world-weariness pass along with the winter, and as the spring blossoms in its newness, so too may the springtime of our souls re-blossom within each of us.

Chag sameach.